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Venice verdicts: art world figures weigh in on the Biennale

Leading museum directors, curators and artists give us their opinions on the massive event

Even for the most hardened art worlders, the Venice Biennale is a marathon for the feet, the eyes and the head, and this year's edition is no exception. Adriano Pedrosa's International Art Exhibition for the 60th Venice Biennale, *Stranieri Ovunque—Strangers Everywhere*, in the Arsenale and the Giardini (until 24 November) brings together more than 300 artists and collectives, who he described as "foreigners, immigrants, expatriates, diasporans, exiles or refugees". Many participants come from the Global South and the majority are showing in Venice for the first time. Then there are the 87 national pavilions and the 30 associated "collateral" projects, along with a multitude of satellite exhibitions and events scattered throughout the institutions and historical spaces of Venice. Having immersed themselves in this artistic smorgasbord, six leading art world figures deliver their very different verdicts on its many strands—official and unofficial—and reveal what caught their eye.

Maria Balshaw, director of Tate

This was an incredibly stimulating Biennale. The central premise, *Foreigners Everywhere*, landed with grace and power in the many voices and languages of this generous and generative Biennale. Seeing the outside of the central pavilion transformed by indigenous Amazonian artists lifted the spirits and challenged us to open our eyes and hearts. Other editions have included indigenous, queer and outsider artists, but none have done it through a complete change of perspective and with such expansive force as Pedrosa.

Global South abstraction in the Giardini was resoundingly brilliant and reflected recent exhibitions and acquisitions of Tate curators in a

way that felt very affirming. The Arsenale was a triumph with Yinka Shonibare at the entrance alongside the Maori Mataaho Collective who gave us collective practice as abstract immersive sculpture, birthing us into the new universe Pedrosa was exploring. The premise of *Foreigners Everywhere* seemed to give an impetus to the national pavilions that had been lacking in recent editions. Many took the theme and used it as a principle or structuring force, which gave a coherence as well as some great pavilions. The strength of indigenous work throughout Pedrosa's spaces especially resonated with Archie Moore's haunting and powerful Australian pavilion—a very worthy winner of the Golden Lion this year.

Another highlight was John Akomfrah's *Listening all Night to the Rain* [at the British pavilion], which took his image/sound/history work to a whole new level, thanks also to the expertise of his many collaborators. Then there was the remarkable operatic film and sculptural world of Wael Shawky [at the Egyptian pavilion]. I was riveted. So visually strong, incisive politically, with exemplary movement and sound—and so funny! More standouts included Jeffrey Gibson for the US: queer, unrepentant and full of joy; Japan, with **Yuko Mohri's** leaky kinetic sculptures sourced from the Venetian locality fashioning a subtle and powerful sustainable practice, and Benin, with Romuald Hazoumè's jerry-can shelter anchoring the heart of their first pavilion.

But my highpoint was the Nigerian pavilion. Curated by Aindrea Emelife, and with a brilliant set of artists, it is leading the debate that the art world and the museum sector needs to have.



The sprawling, historic Arsenale (some of it dating back to the 14th century) is, with the Giardini, one of the two key Biennale venues. For this edition, it hosted the national pavilions of Benin, Italy and Ukraine, among others
Photo: Andrea Avezzi

Elvira Dyangani Ose, director of the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

Above all, I would highlight the polyphonic dialogue between official pavilions, collateral events and the international exhibition. Never before has the world's life drive screamed in unison across such a myriad of aesthetics or been experienced as so harmonically cacophonous. There was criticism of the current wars in Gaza, Sudan, DRC and Ukraine: from Emily Jacir's Dar Jacir project, the Open Group collective at the Polish pavilion, the Congolese takeover of the Netherlands pavilion and the voice of Saul Williams at The Blue Notes jazz sessions in the Ivory Coast pavilion.

For defence against climate change and its impact on Venice and across the world, there was *Gathering into the Maelstrom*, programmed by the Institute of Radical Imagination at the Sales Docks, while the need for environmental and economic sustainability and multispecies theory was explored in Carlos Casas's meditative Bestiary in the Catalonia in Venice project.

Attention to other epistemologies and the ancestral knowledge of indigenous peoples and first nations featured throughout the Arsenale and the Giardini, and the repercussions of these colonial and extractivist practices and policies that insist on our condition as "foreigners everywhere" were especially made manifest in *Nigerian Imaginary*, curated by Aindrea Emelife for the Nigerian pavilion; Sandra Gamarra Heshiki's *Pinacotta Migrante* in Spain, and Archie Moore's *Kith and Kin* for Australia. I also claim a space for simple beauty: in **Yuko Mohri's** Japanese pavilion; Anna Maria Maiolino in the Giardino delle Vergini; and in the eight contributors to *Nebula*, commissioned by the Fondazione In Between Art Film at the Complesso dell'Ospedaletto.

Trevor Yeung, artist representing Hong Kong at the 60th Venice Biennale

I was super excited about the main exhibition and the pavilions at the 2024 Venice Biennale, but I only started to see the exhibitions after the preview days and the experience was nice as there weren't so many queues. **Yuko Mohri's** work in the Japan pavilion is much more powerful when there are fewer visitors in the space. I also loved the whole experience in *Nebula*, a group exhibition [at the Complesso dell'Ospedaletto], featuring site-specific video installations commissioned and produced by the Fondazione In Between Art Film.

For me, a few works also had a special dialogue with each other. The first pair was *Untitled (Human Mask)* (2014) by Pierre Huyghe in his show *Liminal*, at the Punta della Dogana, and *Calling for Rain* (2021) by Khvay Samnang at *The Spirits of Maritime Crossing*, presented by The Bangkok Art Biennale Foundation.

Another pairing was between the specially designed musical instrument used during the performance in the Nordic pavilion, conceptualised by Lap-See Lam, and the black glass vase with a succulent greenish glass overlay by Napoleone Martinuzzi from 1929 and with similar characteristics, on show at the exhibition 1912-1930 *Murano Glass and The Venice Biennale* at Le Stanze del Vetro on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore.